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TEPID LOYALTY

"WHAT Christianity has to fear is not the active hostility of her foes, but the tepid loyalty of her friends."

That sentence, spoken at a Holy Week service by Dr. Frederic W. Perkins, for many years the distinguished minister of the Universalist Church in Washington, will not soon be forgotten by any of us who heard it. Dr. Perkins is a preacher of

great power, with the gift of compelling his hearers to make direct personal application of spiritual truths to their own lives; and I know one Unitarian who has been searching his heart with a new determination since listening to that particular address. Nobody likes to find himself in the company of tepid friends of any great cause, and it is by no means a comfortable suggestion that one's loyalty may be more nearly tepid than one had supposed. The thought carries an unpleasant echo of what the Spirit said to the Church of Laodicea: "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth."

"NOT WITHOUT HEAT"

LOYALTY, if it be genuine, is certain to generate heat; and tepid loyalty is a dying and spurious substitute. To be truly loyal necessarily means that one cares deeply, and lukewarm devotion is almost a contradiction in terms. Friendship, for a person or a cause, will not survive the cooling effect of indifference or neglect. Like Milton's "immortal garland" it cannot be won "without dust and heat."

There is, to be sure, a danger in excessive heat; and loyalty may burn itself out into blind, destructive fanaticism. But that danger is not very

serious for people who call themselves liberals. Much more serious is the opposite peril—the peril of quietly and politely permitting one's loyalty to cool down. I once received through the mail an advertisement of a new kind of electric ice-box, for which it was claimed that it was the only one on the market that "freezes as silently as Nature," producing "constant cold . . . without noise and without wear." I did not purchase one of these devices that "rival Nature's silent freezing," but it has more than once occurred to me that they might be regarded as symbols for the effect which one kind of liberalism has upon loyalty. I have known people whose religion operates in just that efficient way—people whose religion "has no moving parts in its freezing system," but "keeps on giving you the same comforting performance it did when new." And another claim of the company which manufactures these ice-boxes has its relevance, too, in the field of religion: "Already, more than a million families hail its lasting satisfaction."

A MILLION UNITARIANS

THERE are at least a million Unitarians outside the Unitarian churches. That seems to me a conservative estimate. Most of these Unitarians, however, are not finding the lasting satisfaction that their hearts really desire. Some of them are still nominally connected with

the churches into which they were born, but the connection is extremely casual. More of them are frankly outside all churches, because they have come to the conclusion that no church can be found where they will feel at home. There is a kind of spiritual loneliness which these people have so long experienced that it has come to seem the natural thing, but if they could discover that they really belong to a great religious fellowship it would bring a warmth and deep satisfaction they no longer expect to find anywhere. These people belong in the Unitarian Church.

Why don't they find the place in which they belong? And why, when they do happen to discover one of our churches, do they so seldom stay? I think the answer lies in the tepid loyalty of so many of the Unitarians who are already in our churches, which shows itself in a cool disregard of the needs of all outsiders. Silent freezing is not unknown in churches, and a church that has fallen victim to this spiritual disease is not a place where an outsider can ever get to feel that he is an insider.

TYPICAL EXAMPLES

IT isn't what we do, but what we fail to do, that most plainly betrays our lukewarm loyalty. For example, we Unitarians very seldom really indulge ourselves in what may properly be called congregational singing. We give the impression of being afraid of the sound

of our own voices, and the self-conscious reluctance to sing is due to a fear that someone may think we are getting a bit emotional about our religion—which is something that just isn't done in the right circles. Now the effect of this careful refraining from song that might possibly be heard by our neighbors is definitely cooling, not only upon ourselves but upon any outsider who might happen to have dropped in. I am afraid the impression we make—not always, but far too often—is that of a very correct but decidedly tepid body of people, whose concern for religion is as slight as the volume of sound they produce.

As another example, consider the rather common practice among our churches of taking advantage of the minister's absence from his pulpit to stay away from church. The visiting preacher usually doesn't mind—very often he doesn't even guess that he has only half the usual congregation before him; but the parish minister does mind it a lot. He is mortified to learn that a large section of his regular congregation stayed at home when there was a guest in the pulpit, and his irritation is shared by the truly loyal members of the parish.

Staying away from church under such circumstances is bad enough, but even worse is the attitude of some of the absentees who seem to think that their absence from the service is an indication of devoted loyalty to the regular preacher. At that point the irritation ceases to be minor! It is,

obviously, a form of rationalizing that cannot deceive anyone except the person who uses it to conceal from himself the lack of any real loyalty to the church.

LUKEWARM LIBERALISM

IS there something about liberalism itself that lowers the temperature of loyalty, something inherent in the very nature of the liberal attitude of mind that prevents one from getting and keeping a loyalty that is more than lukewarm? I wonder. There are plenty of tepid friends of liberal religion, for example, who go so far as to take pride in the obvious fact that they are neither cold nor hot. Lovers of the middle way, they are scornful of anyone who gets excited about his religion. In their presence one suspects that it isn't "good form" to let one's deeper loyalties find expression, lest one might be accused of having a touch of the fanatic in one's make-up. To be an extremist would be, in their eyes, to sink below the level of respectable good manners; and loyalty has a way of going to most regrettable extremes unless one is constantly on one's guard. Is this the real nature of liberalism?

My thoughts had been following this line for some little time when I opened a letter from one of my colleagues in the Unitarian ministry and found a reference to a passage in a recent book by Ralph Barton Perry. I got hold of the book, and

looked up the passage. What leapt out of the page was the plain statement that my thinking about liberalism had been shot through and through with a deadly poison; and the antidote for that poison was right there too. The title of the book was *In the Spirit of William James*, and the chapter was entitled "A Militant Liberal."

THE RIGHT NOTE

PROFESSOR PERRY presents liberalism, symbolized by William James, as "a fighting faith." "Liberalism is a good cause to fight for—its utopian dreams are on the grand scale, and they can be pursued with a good conscience, a whole heart, and the minimum of bitterness." Those words ring in my ears like certain of the poems of Emily Dickinson, or that song of Pandora by William Vaughan Moody—

> "O hearken, love, the battle-horn!
> The triumph clear, the silver scorn!
> O hearken where the echoes bring,
> Down the grey disastrous morn,
> Laughter and rallying!"

That, surely, is the right note for liberals; and the need for sounding that note is today very great. We have had enough of talk about grey disastrous morns. Nobody can deny their greyness, and it is silly not to recognize disaster when

you see it; but there is something far more important, and that is to make

". . . . a battle-horn to blow
Across the vales of overthrow"

even if the materials out of which we must make it are "loss, and doubt, and dread," and "the shutting mist of death." Said William James, "The chronic fault of liberalism is its lack of speed and passion," and "No one with a spark of reason in him will sit down fatalistically before the croaker's picture. The best of us are filled with the contrary vision of a democracy stumbling through every error till its institutions glow with justice and its customs shine with beauty." Yes, that is the right note for liberals today; and when it is sounded there is no place for the tepid loyalty of lukewarm friends.

F. M. E.

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